

President Macron's Unending Russia Diplomacy



4 hours ago
Roger Cohen

PARIS — Nobody can accuse President Emmanuel Macron of **stinting** on efforts to avert, defuse or stop Russia's war in Ukraine. He has **clocked** 17 phone conversations with President Vladimir V. Putin in the past four months, one personal meeting in Moscow and so many hours of discussion with his own **aides** that he has had **scant** time for the small matter of a presidential election in less than two weeks.

In the same period, he has spoken 25 times to President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine, and met with him in Kyiv and Brussels. On Feb. 25, he spoke twice in a single day to the Ukrainian leader, something he also did with Mr. Putin on Feb. 11. All with a view, Mr. Macron says, "to securing a cease-fire and then the total **withdrawal** of troops."

If diplomacy is measured by perseverance, Mr. Macron is a supreme diplomat. If it is measured by effective realism, the verdict appears less favorable. Up to now, **on the face of it**, he has achieved very little through his 42 calls and three meetings. The war is into its second month with an **untold** number of dead. More than 3.7 million Ukrainian refugees have fled **westward**.

Mr. Zelensky, to judge by a recent interview in The Economist, has been **underwhelmed**. Asked about Mr. Macron's statement at a NATO meeting last week that delivering tanks to Ukraine represented a red line not to be crossed, Mr. Zelensky said France took this position because "they are afraid of Russia. And that's it."

In relations with Russia, **it is less fear that seems to inhabit Mr. Macron than a kind of romantic fascination with the country and its culture**, as well as an intellectual conviction that Europe will not be stable until Russia is integrated into some new security architecture that reflects the Cold War's end.



President Vladimir Putin of Russia meeting with President Macron in Moscow in February, weeks before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Sputnik/via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Mr. Macron returned to the theme of reimagining European security in an interview with France 3 TV on Sunday: "The United States and Russia structured the world during the Cold War. We are no longer in the Cold War," he said. It is Europeans, not Americans, who "live beside Russia," and so "we need a defense policy and we need to define a security architecture for ourselves and not delegate that task."

In some ways, the war in Ukraine has validated Mr. Macron's **long-held** convictions. Germany in the past several weeks has effectively shifted from a pacifist postwar power to one prepared to spend heavily on defense to **revamp** its armed forces. That in turn means that a **pet phrase** of Mr. Macron's — "Europe puissance," or "European power" — is no longer a

pipe dream. Europe will look different if Germany truly **stiffens** its military **backbone**.

The French people appear to have few **misgivings** about Mr. Macron's diplomatic **striving**, despite the fact that he has devoted little time to the campaign and has refused to debate other candidates.

They see, rather, a leader assuming his responsibilities on the world stage. France currently holds the rotating presidency of the 27-member European Union, giving Mr. Macron a double reason to lead Europe's diplomatic efforts — a role the president has said falls naturally to him given Britain's exit from the European Union and Germany's leadership transition.



President Macron with President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine in Kyiv in February, the day after the French leader met with President Putin in Moscow. Pool photo by Thibault Camus

Although he has fallen to about 28.5 percent of the vote in the most recent polls, down from 30 percent, Mr. Macron is still four percentage points up on his prewar average. His main **rival**, Marine Le Pen of the hard-right National Rally, has surged of late to 20 percent, up 2.5 percent in a week, mainly at the expense of the **upstart** hard-right candidate, Eric Zemmour, who is now at 11.5 percent.

The election campaign has been curiously **low-key**, absent Mr. Macron's participation in debates, with no major policy theme and a widespread perception that the **incumbent** has victory secured. On the other hand, the process has been so opaque that Philippe Labro, an author and a longtime observer of French politics, said in a brief conversation that “a surprise may still be **lurking**.”

In all his diplomatic efforts, Mr. Macron has consulted closely with President Biden. There has been **little daylight** between them, with the French president appearing to play good cop to Mr. Biden's bad cop in dealing with Mr. Putin.

But Mr. Biden's improvised comment about Mr. Putin at the end of a speech this weekend in Poland — “For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power” — appeared to open up some discord.

Russia-Ukraine War: Key Developments

The status of peace talks. President Volodymyr Zelensky said in an interview with Russian journalists that Ukraine was “ready” to discuss a neutral geopolitical status but insisted that he would not cede sovereignty. Ukrainian and Russian diplomats are planning to meet in Turkey.

< >

“I wouldn't use this sort of words,” Mr. Macron said in the Sunday interview, insisting that he still hoped to secure a cease-fire and the withdrawal of Russian troops. “If we want to do this, we must not escalate, either in words or actions.”

Mr. Macron has been tough at times with Mr. Putin. After a March 3 call when Mr. Putin described Mr. Zelensky's government as “Nazis,” Mr. Macron replied that this was “lies.” He continued: “Either you are telling yourself stories, or

you're looking for a pretext. What you're saying does not conform with reality."



President Macron, center, with Prime Minister Boris Johnson of Great Britain and President Biden of the United States in Brussels last week. Doug Mills/The New York Times

At other times, Mr. Macron has appeared to have difficulty confronting reality himself. As a former K.G.B. officer, Mr. Putin was trained in the art of seduction, in persuading his interlocutors that he liked them, so that they would reveal themselves more completely. Mr. Macron is also a man who likes to think his charm will win people over. He tried, for example, to get close to President Trump to secure concessions that were never **forthcoming**.

On the plane back from Moscow last month, the French president said he had secured promises from Mr. Putin that Russian troops would be **withdrawn** from Belarus after a planned military exercise, that nuclear weapons would never be positioned there, and that Russia would engage seriously with the Minsk peace process aimed at resolving the conflict over two **breakaway** regions in eastern Ukraine.

Two weeks later, Mr. Putin recognized the independence of the breakaway regions, using an "invitation" from them as a pretext for an invasion of Ukraine that he called "a special military operation." Russian troops were not withdrawn from Belarus.

"Yes, there was duplicity," Mr. Macron said on Feb. 24, the day of the invasion.

Yet he and Mr. Putin have spoken seven times since then.

Roger Cohen is the Paris bureau chief of The Times. He was a columnist from 2009 to 2020. He has worked for The Times for more than 30 years and has served as a foreign correspondent and foreign editor. Raised in South Africa and Britain, he is a naturalized American. @NYTimesCohen

LIVE Updated 46s ago

Russia-Ukraine War >

March 28, 2022

Here are the latest developments from Ukraine.

2 minutes ago

Zelensky says Ukraine will create a group to analyze the effectiveness of sanctions.

16 minutes ago

Allegations of possible poisoning emerge from peace talks held in early March.

1 hour ago

Diplomats from Israel, the U.S. and four Arab countries meet, in part, to hash out differences over the war in Ukraine.

3 hours ago

Ukraine claims some battle successes as Russia focuses on another front.

Our Coverage of the Russia-Ukraine War

Ukrainians and the War

- A rare visit through villages close to Russian lines in the countryside of greater Kyiv showed the success of the Ukrainian resistance and the counterattacks Ukraine's military has mounted.
- For some older Ukrainians, Russia's invasion has revived painful memories of World War II.
- Ukrainian families are taking enormous risks to try to flee Mariupol, traveling through checkpoints — and around land mines — to reach safety.

Russians and the War

- President Vladimir V. Putin evolved over 22 years from a leader viewed as a statesman to a tyrant bent on restoring Russian glory. Here's how.
- Nokia said that it would stop its sales in Russia, but the Finnish company didn't mention it was leaving behind a vast surveillance system.

On the Diplomatic Front

- After President Biden's fiery speech in Warsaw, nine unscripted words — “For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power” — are reverberating around the world.
- French President Emmanuel Macron's outreach to his counterparts in Russia and Ukraine is unending. Whether it is also effective remains to be seen.

How We Verify Our Reporting

- The Times has deployed dozens of journalists to report on the ground in Ukraine, to cut through the fog of misinformation.
- Our team of visual journalists analyzes satellite images, photographs, videos and radio transmissions to independently confirm troop movements and other details.
- We monitor and authenticate reports on social media, corroborating these with eyewitness accounts and interviews. Read more about our reporting efforts.

Understand What Is Going On

- **Avoiding Misinformation:** Here are warning signs to look for before you retweet information about the war.
- **Dig Deeper:** Understand the history of the relationship between Russia and Ukraine, the causes of the conflict and the weapons that are being used.
- **Potential Impact:** The fate of Ukraine could have enormous implications for the world. Learn more about what's at stake and how the energy sector is already affected by the war.
- **Outside Pressures:** Governments and businesses are taking steps to punish Russia. Here are some of the sanctions adopted so far and a list of companies pulling out of the country.
- **Stay Updated:** To receive the latest updates on the war in your inbox, sign up here. The Times has also launched a Telegram channel to make its journalism more accessible around the world.